

Victims' Aid Is Budget Casualty

Funding Cuts to Hit Local Programs; Phantom Savings

By GARY FIELDS

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WASHINGTON -- In drafting the government's 2008 budget, Congress cut back on funding for a Justice Department program to aid crime victims, capping it at \$590 million, \$35 million less than last year.

But because the money for the Crime Victims Fund program doesn't come from taxpayer dollars, restricting it doesn't generate actual savings.

Some lawmakers say the cut was made just to give the appearance of fiscal restraint -- at the expense of the people who seek help at victim-support centers.

Including the numbers in the omnibus bill is "smoke and mirrors," charges Republican Rep. Ted Poe of Texas. "The number is lower in the budget, so the budget shows a saving, but that's a farce."

The cut has sparked a scramble among some victims-rights groups to get the funds reinstated, although most concede that little can be done until the next budget is completed in about a year. Until then, the losers from this move will likely be victim-support programs, especially those at the local level.

The fund was set up by Congress in 1984 as part of the Victims of Crime Act, or VOCA. Its revenue comes from fines, forfeitures and fees levied against federal criminal offenders. The 4,400 local agencies and groups that the fund supports provide such things as shelters for domestic-violence victims to counseling services for victims of child abuse.

Until 2000, the amount of funds distributed depended on collections from the previous year. In 1999, three huge criminal settlements, including \$500 million paid by Hoffmann-La Roche Inc., pushed the fund to \$985 million for the year. That led Congress to cap annual spending and reserve any excess to supplement the fund in leaner years.

Mr. Poe estimates there is currently about \$1.7 billion in the fund. He has introduced a bill that would prohibit Congress from including the fund as part of the federal budget.

State programs are last on the list of those receiving money from the fund, after other areas deemed more critical, such as victim-assistance staff at FBI offices. Even before the current cap reduction, money for state grants had been dropping, from \$395.9 million in 2006 to \$370.6 million in 2007. With the lowering of the cap and increased costs in other programs, state grants will drop to \$328.5 million this year.

"The impact will vary from state to state and program to program, but at some point this will take its toll," says Steve Derene, executive director of the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators. "Some programs will close, and some will turn victims away."

In Iowa, for example, the state-local grants will drop to \$3.5 million, compared with \$3.9 million in 2007, and will result in a 10% to 15% cut in each grant, according to an analysis done by Marti Anderson, director of the state's Crime Victim Assistance Division, and released by Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller. In addition, some staff who run victims' programs will be cut, as will the number of counseling sessions received by rape and domestic-violence victims, according to the analysis.

Congress's recent move follows several attempts in previous years by Bush administration budget writers to divert surplus funds above the cap into the Treasury Department's general fund, opening the way for the money to be used for programs other than victims' services. Members of Congress have rejected those attempts.

In its initial budget request for 2008, the Bush administration asked for \$625 million. Members in the House suggested increasing the cap to \$635 million. Advocates surmise that when various committees eventually began imposing across-the-board cuts, they didn't exclude the Victims Fund, even though it isn't part of the government's general-revenue pool.

"I don't know whether there's anything that can be done prior to the next budget," says Republican Sen. Jon Kyl of Arizona. He is concerned that domestic-violence shelters and rape crisis centers will be closed, along with crime-victim legal clinics, which provide free services. "It's taken a long time to get those started. They will be among the first cuts," he says.

Some activists say they will push Congress to revisit the cap when they return this month, but Mr. Derene agrees with Sen. Kyl that it is too late for 2008. He says lobbying efforts are likely to focus on 2009 spending.

"From what I hear, there could be a supplemental appropriations bill, but that wouldn't happen until some time in the spring, which would be too late for state assistance programs," Mr. Derene says.

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